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The Theology of Providence

The subject of providence is one that cuts across several traditional disciplinary boundaries. These include philosophical, systematic and pastoral theology. In dealing with the form, content and purpose of the divine rule over the world, providence touches upon speculative and dogmatic themes that are also of deep existential significance. There are at least four reasons for tackling this subject in our current context. First, it is a central article of Christian faith. If the doctrines of creation and redemption are to be properly related, then some account requires to be given of how the work of the Creator is extended beyond an initial act of making the universe from out of nothing. Second, the problem of evil calls into question the divine ordering of the world and thus demands an account of providence that offers resources for understanding both the divine rule and the manifest opposition to it. And, third, the ways in which the concept of providence is expropriated by civil religion, political rhetoric and varieties of cultural superstition require a theological account that is distinctive and alert to the possible abuses of this topic. Fourth, the doctrine continues of course to be of pastoral significance for Christian faith and thus requires some responsible theological comment.

A classical Reformed text, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) articulates elegantly both the dogmatic and pastoral content of the providence. As the Father Almighty, God not only rules over all things but also ensures that these serve a purpose for which we can be thankful and cheerful.

What do you understand by the providence of God?

A The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?

A We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move.¹

In what follows, I offer several theses. These aim to mark out an account of providence that is more intellectually modest and low-key than classical formulations but one which also seeks to be adequate to Scripture and the pastoral needs of the Church.

1 The classical doctrine of providence as it emerged in the history of the Church is too heavily indebted to philosophical resources in the ancient world, particularly Stoicism.

The term 'providence' itself is not widely used in Scripture. Reference is made to the Latin 'providebit' in Genesis 22:8 where Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide a sacrificial lamb. Yet generally the term *providentia* and the Greek *pronoia* are taken to

¹ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions 27 & 28 in Arthur C. Cochrane (ed.) *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, (London: SCM, 1966), 309–310.

denote divine foresight. Although these are closely linked to notions of provision, rule, guidance and purpose, the term ‘providence’ seldom occurs in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.

Its linguistic prominence in Christian theology is more indebted to the influence of ancient philosophy. This has also had a significant effect upon its material content. Here an account of providence was offered, largely in conscious opposition to Epicurean notions of chance. In Plato’s *Laws*, divine rule is affirmed against the view that the gods have no interest in human affairs. For the Epicureans, however, natural and historical events are not governed by any laws or purpose. These happen in a haphazard manner than is attributable only to chance. In face of this, Stoic philosophy insists upon the determination of everything by the operation of natural laws. These laws reflect a divine logos that infuses the cosmos and which works inexorably to fulfil a natural more purpose. Consider the following remarks of Seneca.

This much I now say, - that those things which you call hardships, which you call adversities and accursed are, in the first place, for the good of the persons themselves to whom they come; in the second place, that they are for the good of the whole human family, for which the gods have a greater concern than for single persons; again, I say that good men are willing that these things should happen and, if they are unwilling, that these things happen thus by destiny, and that they rightly befall good men by the same law which makes them good.²

Two features of this account are relevant in assessing its appropriation by Christian theology. First, it is an austere account in which an impersonal moral purpose is fulfilled through everything that happens. Its tone is reminiscent of sermons that many of us will have heard. Within this worldview the sufferings that befall us are to be accepted as our fate, which if we willingly assent to it in the proper manner, will lead to an increase in virtue. Second, this account tends towards a radical determinism in the role that is assigned to human freedom and responsibility. Both Zeno and Chrysippus liken the human situation to that of a dog tied to a cart. The dog can willingly run along keeping pace with the cart, or else it will be dragged. Either way its destination remains the same.³ On this account every event thus serves a purpose. Foreseen by the gods, the total system of causes governing the universe can be described as ‘fate’.

These tendencies are undoubtedly present in the writers of the early church but they are also adapted and at times checked and corrected. In her valuable study of the literature, Silke-Petra Bergjan notes the recurrence of several themes – the retributive character of divine providence, its pedagogical function, its eschatological ordering, and its particular concern for individuals.⁴ While much of the thought and language is borrowed, it reflects an attention to Scriptural themes. So for example, Theophilus of Antioch can write as if pagan and Christian teachers say much the same thing. ‘The Sibyl, then, and the other prophets, yea, and the poets and philosophers, have clearly taught both concerning righteousness and judgement, and punishment; and also concerning providence, that God cares for us, not only for the living among us, but also for those that are dead.’⁵ On the other hand, the Scriptures provide clearer and deeper

² Seneca, ‘De Providentia’ in *Moral Writings*, Loeb Classical Library, John Basore (ed.), (London, Heinemann, 1928) III.1–2, p.15.

³ See John Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 127.

⁴ Silke-Petra Bergjan, *Der Fürsorgende Gott* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002).

⁵ *To Autolycus*, Book Two, 38.

insights into the workings of God's providence. Justin Martyr sees not a fatal necessity or an impersonal fate governing the affairs of human beings, but a God with foreknowledge, oversight and provision for individual men and women.⁶ Clement of Alexandria seems to split the difference by arguing at some length that providence is a widely-accepted and ineluctable truth throughout the nations of the world, but that its finer details are understood only by Christian philosophers. God is understood as the 'invisible and sole, and most powerful, and most skilful and supreme cause of all things most beautiful' but the inference of these truths require the teaching of the church.⁷

Two later examples, both from the early 5th century, illustrate further some of the tensions already latent within 2nd century teaching on providence. Theodoret of Cyrus in a treatise dedicated to the subject advances a series of rather engaging apologetic arguments for providential order. In many ways, these anticipate the design arguments of Archdeacon William Paley by the best part of 1500 years. The providence of God is apparent in the regulation of the planetary system, the seasons of the year, the harmony between species and environment, and the physiognomy of the human body. Even our buttocks are happily arranged, he argues to provide a natural couch for sitting on the ground or on stone.⁸

Around the same time, Augustine's *City of God* offers a more sombre and chastened reflection on the ways of providence but nevertheless one that also affirms the rule of God throughout the cosmos. In the *City of God*, he inveighs against all forms of astrological fatalism. The constellation of the stars has no causal influence upon life on earth. These are not determined by remote events. As in Theodoret, much of the discussion has a curiously modern ring particularly in his extended discussion of twins. Their similarities and differences must be accounted for by proximate causes of parentage, diet, upbringing, external circumstances and so on. None of these can be explained by the identical constellations at the time of their birth. And yet we can also affirm that God through these secondary causes, including voluntary agents, brings about an overarching purpose. The political significance of this will be mentioned in the fourth lecture.

We might draw two lessons from all this. The assumption that church shared providentialist beliefs with the philosophies of the ancient world led its teaching in one direction. No doubt the struggle against theories of chance and fortune helped to forge this alliance. But it led to an overbearing determinism that leaned too far towards an acquiescence with the way things were. This ignored more Biblical themes of struggle and resistance, these requiring a more dynamic approach to the subject with reference to the agency of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it is clear that already in the early church the attention to Scripture required some criticism and qualification of regnant theories of providence. Divine providence is purposive, particular, and parental and not to be confused with fate or fortune.

⁶ E.g. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 44.

⁷ Clement, *Stromateis*, 5.14. See also Origen's Stoic-like description of providence. *De Principiis*, Book 2.1.3. 'Although the whole world is arranged into office or different kinds, its condition, nevertheless, is not to be supposed as one of internal discrepancies and discordances; but as our one body is provided with many members, and is held together by one soul, so I am of opinion that the whole world also ought to be regarded as some huge and immense animal, which is kept together by the power and reason of God as by one soul.'

⁸ Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, trans. Thomas Halton (New York: Newman Press, 1988), Discourse 3.21.

The leaning in a Stoic and determinist direction generated some serious problems for the later articulation of the doctrine, at least in the Latin West. In Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, for example, we find much that reflects the Stoic inheritance.⁹ The primal will of God explains everything that happens – nothing that is not fixed by divine decree can occur in the cosmos. While God’s will is mediated by secondary causes, these latter are instruments that in every respect fulfil the former. One consequence of this is that the distinction between divine permitting and willing, more characteristic of Orthodox theology, tends to collapse in much medieval and Reformed dogmatics.¹⁰ In practical terms, it leads to an account of providence in which too much is attributed to a positive divine will, at the expense of rendering God inscrutable and impersonal. This exercised a powerful hold over the western tradition and became a source of complaint by Karl Barth in its radical revision of the Reformed doctrine of providence.¹¹

2 The doctrine of providence is misplaced when presented on speculative, introspective, or political grounds. Grounded in revelation, it is an article of faith that needs to be carefully distinguished from surrogate accounts.

We cannot assume the divine rule of the world on the basis of empirical observation. Too much that happens is unpredictable and contrary to what we understand to be the will of God for this to be attributed to providence. Theologians, preachers and pastors of course have attempted this, sometimes in ways that were well-intentioned and even on occasion inspiring. Consider this extract from a sermon of Hugh Blair, the great preacher of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Why this man was prematurely carried away from the world in the beginning of a promising course; why that deserving family were left overwhelmed with grief and despair, by the loss of one who was their sole benefactor and support; why friendships cemented by tender ties were suddenly torn asunder by death; these are inquiries to which we can now make no reply, and which throw a dark gloom over the conduct of the Almighty. But the spirits of the just above, who are admitted to a larger view of the ways of God, see the reasons of such counsels. They see that one man was seasonably taken away from dangers and evils to come, which, unknown to him, were hovering over his head. They see that Providence was in secret preparing unexpected blessings for the family who appeared to be left disconsolate and hopeless. They see that it was time for friendships to be dissolved, when their longer continuance would, to some of the parties, have proved a snare. Where we behold nothing but the rod of power stretched forth, they discern an interposition of the hand of mercy. Let us wait till this promised *hereafter* arrive, and we shall in like manner be satisfied concerning the events that now disturb and perplex us.¹²

⁹ See for example *Summa Theologiae* 1a.22.1 and *Institutes* I.17.8. I have tried elsewhere to show how these determinist accounts are somewhat modified by the presence of Scriptural themes in Aquinas and Calvin. See ‘Divine Providence and Action’ *God’s Life in Trinity*, Michael Welker & Miroslav Volf (eds.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 153–165.

¹⁰ See David Bentley Hart, in Francesca Murphy & Philip Ziegler (eds.), *The Providence of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2009),

¹¹ For a summation of the doctrine in providence in Reformed orthodoxy, see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 251–280.

¹² Hugh Blair, ‘Of our Present Ignorance of the Ways of God’, in David Fergusson (ed.), *Scottish Philosophical Theology* (Exeter: Imprint Press, 2007), 84. A distinguished preacher and minister of St

While this is moving and appealing in many ways, it suggests too hastily that everything works out well in the best of all possible worlds. In some future estate, there will be a perspective by which our seeming misfortunes are rendered blessings. Three problems attach to this. One is that while the future may enable us to overcome or even forget the past, it cannot on these terms be said to justify it, as if what once cursed us was merely a blessing in disguise. (It is curious how many of clichés and expressions of speech that we carry with us are overloaded with notions of a divine providence, as in the old Scots adage, ‘what’s for you, will no go by you.’) Second, this epistemological perspective is not ours, at least not yet. We have to assume it in order to offer this type of response, and this we cannot do simply as an interpretation of what is presently accessible. The surd element in human existence is not adequately acknowledged. The extent to which our lives are torn apart by accident or sheer bad luck seems missing. The dysteleological nature of suffering is not fully registered in Blair’s reflections. This kind of pastoral exhortation, for all its elegance and genuine sensitivity, seems strangely out of place after the traumas of the 20th century. Third, from a christological perspective we have to regard this world not as perfectly ordered but in need of its redemption. The doctrine of providence must also take a cruciform shape rather than appear as a theology of glory in which everything is already perfectly in place.

A further reason for a greater caution than is apparent in many speculative accounts of providence is our awareness of the ways in which these have too readily been co-opted for imperialist and totalitarian projects. Again much of this reflects the 20th century experience. In his book *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile shows how many of the political entities that have emerged in modern times have tended to appropriate religious symbols, myths and rituals drawn from older faith traditions.¹³ This is true particularly of fascism, communism and Nazism, but also of the civil religion that continues to manifest itself in western democracies. Within the rhetoric of these political regimes, there were powerful but problematic claims to be the vehicles in world history of divine providence. Saint-Simon remarked on his deathbed that religion can never disappear from the world but only transform itself.¹⁴ This is apparent in the manner in which a wide variety of political movements functioned in a religious manner, seeking to mobilise the masses by the use of religious rhetoric and ideology.

The term ‘civil religion’ was first coined by Rousseau to describe the ways in which a religion with its stories, rituals, festivals and symbols might serve to foster a sense of communal identity and so articulate the primary political loyalty of citizens.¹⁵ For Rousseau, the dogmas of a civil religion had to be ‘few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary’. He proposed the following, ‘the existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract, and the laws.’¹⁶ Civil religion must also have a tolerance threshold.

Giles in Edinburgh, Blair was also the first holder of a chair in English literature. His sermons went through numerous editions in the 19th century and were translated into Germany by Schleiermacher.

¹³ Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Quoted by Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 20) 30.

¹⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, transl. G. D. H. Cole (London: Dent, 1973), Book 4, Chapter VIII, 276.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Without this, religion will undermine rather than promote social harmony. The only feature of a religion that must be proscribed is intolerance.¹⁷

Something of this is echoed in Jefferson's inaugural addresses and of the way subsequently that American history was woven into a discourse that expressed a sense of divine providence through a mission to the rest of the world, a testimony to political freedom, and the heroic sacrifice of the war dead. National acts of thanksgiving for the general and special mercies of the Creator were thus elicited. As a promised land for refugees who found freedom, dignity and happiness amidst their ethnic and religious diversity, America could articulate through the 19th century the distinctive tenet of its civil religion. Through the traumas of the civil war, Lincoln could interpret the sacrifices involved partly as a divine chastisement but partly also a regeneration of a national mission.

In Europe, civil religion functioned somewhat differently but also with close parallels. The British imperial project was reinforced through much of the 19th century by the conviction that this was a divinely-appointed mission and one which rendered an important service to other parts of the world. Religion thus not only promoted internal civic life but legitimised imperial expansion, much of the appeal being again to divine providence. Wilberforce, the evangelical reformer and leading abolitionist, argued that the opening of India to the imperial venture was itself providentially organised. The renewal of the East India Company charter in 1813 enabled Wilberforce and the Clapham sect to campaign for the insertion of the so-called 'pious clause' in the parliamentary act which required formal support for Christian mission in the sub-continent. Petitions were submitted to parliament. These had amassed almost half a million signatures, much of the supporting campaign drawing heavily upon notions of divine providence. Robert Hall, a Baptist minister, claimed that 'our acquisition of power has been so rapid, so extensive, and so disproportionate to the limits of our native empire, that there are few events in which the interposition of Providence may be more distinctly traced.'¹⁸

The difficulties surrounding civil religion are not too hard to identify. Michael Walzer has noted that it tends to work best when it is least like a religion.¹⁹ In other words, its tenets and rituals are more likely to be widely embraced when these are of a minimalist nature. Civil religion requires as a social consensus a theological minimalism but what happens where this does not exist? While it may be possible to incorporate Jewish and Muslim citizens into a piety of creation and providence, civil religion will inevitably struggle in societies where there are higher levels of secularism and outright disbelief. These of course may be in a minority, but arguably much of western Europe is now in this position. A further difficulty arises when the terms of a civil religion imply an exceptional mission under divine providence that is not given to other societies and nations. As Walzer again points out, its domestic effects may be benign but these can spill over into national hubris with bad side-effects. 'Civil religion often makes for intolerance in international society by encouraging parochial pride about life on this side of the border and suspicion or anxiety about life on the other.'²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 276–277.

¹⁸ Quoted by Stewart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire 1815–1914* (Harlow: Longman, 2008), 37.

¹⁹ Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 77.

²⁰ Ibid., 76.

Philosophies of history have often sought to offer an account of progress in history whereby it has a forward momentum gathering up each contingent event and episode into a narrative that moves inexorably towards a grand conclusion. The most famous of all such accounts is Hegel's, although he himself admitted that we can only detect this pattern with the benefit of hindsight. 'When philosophy paints its grey on grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey on grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.'²¹

In one important respect, Hegel's is a deeply Christian philosophy. Unlike all the great philosophers that preceded him, he finds in history the key to the meaning of our existence. This must owe a great deal to the Judeo-Christian heritage and its claim that God's purposes are revealed and enacted temporally. Divine revelation unfolds in history and can be known via the testimony of the past. So historical and philosophical knowledge are intertwined, on this account. In other ways, however, this is far removed from a fully Christian account of providence. First, it appears to subordinate the claims of each individual to the greater good of the whole. If we find ourselves trampled amidst wars of conquest, this may serve some grander purpose being enacted across history. Yet it seems far removed from the Biblical concern for those on the margins, the excluded and dispossessed who are privileged by the prophets in their teaching and by Jesus in his lifestyle. This commitment to people and groups on the underside of history seems curiously lacking in Hegel's great project. A second anxiety with any progressive account of history is that it presupposes an immanent purpose being worked out inexorably within human events. Yet this leaves out much of the apocalyptic element in Scripture and tradition. Here events have an unpredictable tendency to take a turn for the worst, to produce crises, contradictions and disharmonies within nature and history. Only God can remedy this eschatologically, acting from above and beyond rather than through a gradual process of cosmic evolution. At this point, Hegel and every progressivist philosophy of history seem at odds with an important element of the Christian tradition.

As an alternative, however, personal introspection is not in itself the primary index to divine providence, although this is not to deny that there may be some important signs of God's grace evident in our individual lives. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a life of faith without these. Nevertheless, we should not seek to make of our lives microcosms of a Hegelian philosophy of history or a Stoic account of nature in which every event inherently serves some wider pattern that God is working within us. There is much that happens to us that is the result of good and ill fortune, external circumstances in which we find ourselves constrained, and of course our own failings and limitations. To attempt to see all these as directly from the hand of God or as fated misses the significant role exercised by these forces in the created order. To say that we have no regrets in life, as I heard a distinguished Christian philanthropist once claim, seems naively triumphalist. Or to claim simply that everything is meant to be and must be for the best in the best of all possible worlds is unduly fatalist.

Much Protestant literature has of course proceeded along these lines with attention devoted to the inner spiritual development and personal biographies of the faithful. The hand of God is detected in everything that happens so that some pattern must be

²¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, ?

discerned or interpreted. This can lead to some quite frivolous speculation in the event of good fortune – such as God’s reserving a parking place for me – or crushing disappointment and disillusion when things suddenly go wrong for us. Why is God doing this to me, especially when I have tried to lead a faithful and upright life? Jesus’ remarks about the fate of those were crushed by the tower of Siloam and his reflection on the man born blind suggests that there is no direct divine correlation between the merits of our actions and the fate we suffer. Each event may provide a fresh opportunity for serving God or deepening faith, but it is important to distinguish this from the (more Stoic) claim that these events are directly visited upon us to exercise some hidden blueprint.

A fuller treatment of this aspect of the topic would need to consider the ways in which human beings appear incurably superstitious. Notions that we can manipulate God (or some pagan surrogate such as fate, destiny or fortune) abound in activities that are inherently unpredictable simply because of their complexity, or because we lack any adequate knowledge of causal processes, or because of the way in which outcomes are finely balanced. The National Lottery in the UK has played on this with its publicity suggesting that this may be the night of all nights when fortune has fingered us for a life-transforming windfall. Most of us will have little difficulty in recounting pastoral circumstances where people sought to manipulate divine providence by their actions, often with the very best of motives. I can recall once being asked to bless a new house because the couple who were living there were experiencing fertility problems. We know that sports personalities are inherently superstitious and religious, sometimes because this is thought to give them a competitive advantage. Some golfers will silently pray before making a crucial shot, as if God was likely to reward them for their piety, thus presumably punishing an opponent who plays without such invocation. A story is told of the famous baseball catcher, Yogi Berra who waited behind an incoming hitter. When his opponent proceeded to cross himself before receiving the first pitch, Berra quietly said to him, ‘Why don’t you just let God enjoy the game?’

3 Providence in Scripture narrates an account of the God-world relationship that is described often in covenantal terms. Although asymmetrical, this relationship is one of co-dependence and is threatened by human failure and the turbulence of natural forces.

In making this claim, much that is latent in the traditional doctrine of providence is called into question on grounds of Scriptural adequacy. This has become particularly apparent through recent encounter with Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. The assertion that God is in some sense dependent upon creation is of course in tension with much of what has traditionally been held about divine aseity and impassibility. This aspect of the tradition is important in pointing to ways in which God is quite unlike creatures and thus establishes in creation a set of relations that are asymmetric. Nevertheless, the surface narrative of Scripture strongly suggests that these relations are marked by co-dependence and a relative autonomy of parties.

In recent writers such as Brueggemann and Fretheim there is a corrective stress on the relationality of God with respect to creation, a relationality that is often expressed though not exhausted by the language of covenant. References scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that God is a relational being by virtue of the divine

community that God inhabits. Later Christian theology has been nervous around these allusions, particularly since they seem to threaten an exclusive monotheism. However, we read of the divine council, the sons of God, heavenly messengers and a celestial wisdom (Gen 1:26; Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 23:18–23; Proverbs 8: 22–31). Whatever their ontological status or function, it is clear that they underscore the strong Scriptural sense of God existing in a communicative relationship with other conscious beings and as being properly characterised in personal and relational terms. Biblical metaphors for God are generally personal rather than impersonal, often making use of quite anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. Fretheim classifies these metaphors generally as personal, ordinary, concrete, everyday and secular. In other words, they typically draw upon the mundane world of social life to characterise the identity of God in relation to the world. He notes that even non-personal metaphors tend towards a relational aspect. ‘I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’ (Exodus 19:4) The giving of the divine name to Israel also intensifies the covenant relationship entailing further possibilities of encounter and communication. At the same time, however, it also makes God’s honour vulnerable to the misuse of that name.

The Hebrew prohibition of images, moreover, is not cited to protect God’s ineffability or unknowability so much as to misrepresent God’s relatedness. The idols ‘have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; and there is no breath in their mouths.’ (Psalm 115:5–7) Unlike the false gods, as in the contest on Mount Carmel, Israel’s God is one who lives and therefore can speak, hear and act. As such, this God is also the creator of the world, living in relation not only to Israel but to all the families of the earth. (Genesis 12:3) The affirmation that ‘God is’ or ‘God lives’ is explicated in dynamic, personal and relational terms by the Old Testament. Here God is not approached by a philosophical *via negativa* or an abstract account of the most perfect being, so much as through a tradition of divine-human exchange.

The relationship of God to creatures is expressed, moreover, through a system in which all creatures are inter-related in a cosmic whole. God does not relate to us merely as individuals but as persons who exist in relations to one another and to the wider environment. The social and natural order of the world are deeply connected in ways that affect God also. This is a recurrent theme in the Psalms and the prophets. ‘The land mourns and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.’ (Hosea 4:1–3) One feature of this web of life is that we have a system that is neither chaotic nor deterministic. There is a rhythm that is natural to it in the regularity of the seasons, the succession of day and night, the movement of the planets, and the universal patterns of life and death. The world is God’s good creation. At the same time, however, there is ‘no little play in the system’.²² Within the order of the cosmos, there are events that appear random, surprising and surd. There are forces, sometimes within us, that threaten the harmony and delicate complexity of life. Although good and worthy of celebration, the world is not yet a finished project; it remains a site under construction. The closing speeches of the Book of Job explore this duality of divinely bestowed order threatened by untamed forces. This ambivalence of God’s world needs to be registered by an adequate doctrine of providence.

²² Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, op. cit., 19.

If we think of God's calling into being an interconnected world established in a continuing relationship with its Maker and Redeemer, then we can attribute a proper place to creaturely action, initiative and power in ways that reflects the co-dependence of God without lapsing into synergism or Pelagianism. The divine-human relationship is asymmetric in terms of its setting, yet it is one in which God becomes reactive and in important respects dependent upon what has been made. Within this conceptual space, activities such as prayer, obedience, rebellion, forgiveness, redemption and blessing now become possible. Fretheim writes, 'God works from within a committed relationship with the world and not on the world from without in total freedom. God's faithfulness to promises made always entails the limiting of divine options. Indeed, such is the nature of this divine commitment that the relationship with Israel (and, in a somewhat different way, the world) is now constitutive of the divine identity. The life of God will forever include the life of the people of God as well as the life of the world more generally.'²³

What this suggests is that there at least two aspects of providential reflection in Scripture. Roughly speaking, these correspond to a general and special providence although the tension between them has often been overlooked. In one aspect, the order of the world reflects the divine wisdom. The regularity of day and night, the seasons of the year, and the provision that is made for creatures all attest the covenant faithfulness of God (Genesis 8:22; Psalm 104). This order is experienced in the daily rhythms of life creating stability, well being and human flourishing. It is closely aligned with respect for God's law in the Psalms and Wisdom literature. Elements of New Testament teaching draw upon this tradition, especially the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. God's gracious provision is for all creatures, relieving us of unnecessary anxiety. (Matthew 6: 25–34). At the same time, Scripture presents the social and natural world as threatened by disruptive elements. Its order and design are often concealed and disturbed by the forces of sin, suffering and evil. These are contested by the action of God in patterns of struggle, resistance and redemption. The purpose and rule God are not wholly apparent, as Job and Qoheleth suggest. Here providence is described more dialectically, its discernment becoming difficult even within the lives of the faithful. God's regime is hidden in ways that are troublesome. In the experience of exile, it becomes difficult identify what God intends or does. Yet this does not result in a suspension of belief; instead it is the occasion for fresh and deepened affirmation. 'Indeed, in its countertestimony, Israel used the occasion of Yahweh's hiddenness to magnify its claims for the generous, creative, and faithful governance of Yahweh.'²⁴ This more dramatic and interactive account is apparent in Paul's remarks about the foolishness of the cross by which God's wisdom is displayed is not through standardised norms of power, such as those depicted in Greek philosophy (1 Corinthians 1: 18–25). By contrast, the world is redeemed through the cross, the paradigmatic image of divine weakness and dependence upon the created world. The event of Jesus' crucifixion is itself part of the cosmic whole, but a part that is proclaimed to determine its identity and final outcome. Yet the subsequent preaching of this gospel and the spread of the Church are also viewed as expressing a divine purpose within history, 'a plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 357.

One feature of this array of Scriptural allusions to divine foresight and provision is that it is misleading to restrict the doctrine of providence to a sub-division of the doctrine of creation. Its standard textbook locus, this has not served an account of providence well. It is feature of all three articles and suggests the need for a differentiated account of divine action in any adequate account of providence. A Trinitarian account of providence might usefully assist us in this respect by presenting it in ways that are not dominated by a single model appropriated to the first person.²⁵

4. If we know the content and scope of God's providence from contemplating the history of Israel and its fulfilment in the person and work of Christ, then the signs of providence will begin here and spread outwards into the cosmos. Yet in discerning these we remain within the circle of faith.

God's providence in our lives is most evidently displayed not in material success, health or other forms of prosperity. It is best evinced in the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and in the power of the sanctifying Spirit. Providence is evident less in what happens to us than in how we live 'amidst the changes and chances of this mortal life'. Its centre is in the church's life of praise, confession, supplication and obedience. From there, we can understand the course of our lives and our world as governed by God's good providence. But this must remain an expression of faith rather than a psychological insight, a cosmic vision or a political philosophy. In this way alone, we may believe and look for the signs of God's good creation, the redeeming work of Christ and the coming kingdom everywhere around us. These can be discerned variously in the rhythms of life, the grace discovered in our lives, gifts of human friendship, and even in political states that achieve a measure of justice, civic harmony and peace for their citizens. But our discernment must always be partial and often reserved amidst the shadows and imperfections of the world. It must proceed outwards from the centre of faith predicated upon 'foolishness of the cross'.

So what we have here is something like the rudiments of a chastened and deflationary doctrine, yet one that is faithful to the Word of God and adequate to the pastoral needs of the church. It was this impulse that drove Karl Barth to the claim that the clearest signs of providence in the history of the world are the preservation of Holy Scripture, the witness of the Jews, and the survival of the church.²⁶ What is surprising about this list is perhaps its modesty in relation to grand schemes of history. He does not speak about the rise of democracy in the modern world, the demise of Hitler's regime, or the birth of the United Nations. Only those events and circumstances that stand most closely in relation to the light of Christ can be represented as tokens of God's providence.

However, as we have already seen with respect to the Hebrew Bible the rule of God is not confined to Israel or the church. It extends outwards from this central action to the entire created world. In this respect the distinction between works of special and general providence may have a place. The work of salvation determines not only the community of the faithful but the whole cosmos, and this must include the natural world and our rootedness in it. To that extent, we can rejoice in the regularities of

²⁵ This is argued in recent studies by Bernhold Klappert and Charles Wood, *The Question of Providence* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

²⁶ *Church Dogmatics* III/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 19),

nature and the rhythms of life as echoes of God's goodness, those phenomena that have often been classified as works of general providence. Given the unity of Scripture, the single economy of creation and salvation, and the cosmic scope of christology, there must be a place for this in the life of the church as well in the life of Israel. So the created order can be celebrated for its goodness as can our physical and social life as belonging to it.

Particular events may also resonate with God's purposes and be received gratefully in this light – birth, marriage and sometimes even death – but their reception as such must always be provisional and tentative. To the extent that they forward Christ's purpose, they can attest God's rule. But our vision is partial at best and our confession at this juncture remains a modest one. Even within the good creation there is also decay, disease, and the shadows of life as well as cruel misfortune together with the insidious and widespread effects of sin. Christian faith requires us to think of the same world as both providentially ordered and yet also fallen. In celebrating God's providence, the Psalms live with this tension as also does Job, a book too often neglected in the church's theological reflections.

Social and political harmony may also be interpreted rightly as signs of God's providence insofar as these are intended by God, made possible now in part, and promised more fully. Isaiah's vision of international peace is a celebration of God's coming providence that determines our political and social life already (Isaiah 2:2-4). But this cannot confer upon any one political programme or epoch a privileged instantiation of divine providence. History is littered with examples of groups and nation states that claimed too much for themselves often at the expense of others.

Concluding Postscript

Can we speak of everything that happens as willed by God? Classical Reformed dogmatics did this by reference to the threefold pattern of divine action – preservation, concurrence and over-ruling. But we should speak of the divine will only in a clearly differentiated manner. Insofar as the world is created and sustained by God, it exists in its totality by the divine will. If this entails that every event is permitted by God, then we cannot shrink from speaking of everything happening in accordance with the divine will. At the same time, if everything that happens can create an occasion for some redemptive prospect, then we cannot say that any event lies irrevocably outside the providential rule of God. However, what must also be said, and perhaps more clearly than before, is that the nature and purpose of God's action in redemption produce a criterion by which the divine will is to be measured. And in this respect, there is clearly much that happens that cannot be said to be God's will. On the contrary, the setting of God's will in Christ must entail that God rejects all that is not in conformity with this. The classical doctrine said too little in this respect, thus creating the impression of an inscrutable and impersonal sovereign will. Here we must eschew any appeal to hidden explanations, as in Blair's sermon cited above, and admit that there is a surd element in life that is incomprehensible.

Whether answers are what people need is any case doubtful. Would it help to cope with the loss of a child to learn that it fitted some overarching scheme the details of which will some day be made clear to us? What is needed is strength to keep going and the

hope that Christ's victory will finally gather together all that God blesses in our lives. In this respect, the doctrine of providence needs to be found even more serviceable on bad days than on good. 'For all we can tell, may not we ourselves praise Him more purely on bad days than on good, more surely in sorrow than in rejoicing, more truly in adversity than in progress?' ²⁷

This seems to me one mistake that much modern criticism of religion makes. If the cosmos contained only order with good consequences for everyone we would find it easier to believe. This is an assumption of much current secular attack on faith. Yet faith seems to flourish on stonier ground; we need it more and it serves us better in times of suffering and struggle. Many of the great hymns of providence were written in times of threat, pain and fear. Luther's 'Ein' Feste Burg' is the hymn of a beleaguered church threatened by political uncertainty, Rinckart's 'Nun danket alle' was written for his community at a time following plague and heartbreaking loss. George Matheson's 'O love that wilt not let me go' was composed amidst the onset of blindness. Such hymns of providence succeed when attention is directed towards the christological centre of faith and then works outwards and inwards; in doing so, they prevent a lurch into speculation, sentimentality, or a premature closure on the problems.

²⁷ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 297.